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# Herbert Martin's Portrayal of Paul Laurence Dunbar to be Featured on C-Span

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June 8, 2000  
Contact: Teri Rizvi  
rizvi@udayton.edu

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## NEWS RELEASE

### HERBERT MARTIN'S PORTRAYAL OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR TO BE FEATURED ON C-SPAN

DAYTON, Ohio — When Herbert Woodward Martin was a child growing up in Birmingham, Ala., his classmates taunted him when he read aloud Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry.

The youth bore an uncanny resemblance to Dunbar, a Dayton native and the first black American to achieve national eminence as a poet. Because the schoolchildren had to memorize Dunbar's works, "they took out their dislike for poetry on me," remembers Martin. "Either I've repressed that or gotten over it."

Today, the University of Dayton's poet-in-residence hears only applause and has earned a national reputation for his portrayal of Dunbar. C-SPAN1 will feature Martin reading Dunbar's poems in a five- to 10-minute piece that will air Friday, June 16, at 6:55 a.m. and 7:55 p.m.

"Reading" is not exactly the right word. Dressed in a turn-of-the-century morning coat and striped trousers, Martin "borrows" Dunbar's voice to bring the poet's verse to life. At times, he exhibits the spiritual frenzy of a black preacher in a folk sermon. In other moments, he delivers Dunbar's humorous refrains with the rat-a-tat speed and perfect timing of a successful late-night TV comedian.

"He was great," says Brandon Tilman, C-SPAN producer/videographer. "He'll be the main narrator of the piece. It's a short documentary-style feature, a vignette, of Dunbar."

A C-SPAN crew visited the Dunbar House and taped Martin on campus in April when one of its "school buses" — a studio on wheels — made an educational stop in the Dayton area to give schoolchildren a close-up view of how the public affairs network puts together its pieces.

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OFFICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS  
300 College Park Dayton, Ohio 45469-1679  
(937) 229-3241 (937) 229-3063 Fax  
[www.udayton.edu](http://www.udayton.edu)

"I try to show that the dialect poems are accessible," says Martin, who became seriously interested in Dunbar's work in 1972 when he organized a centennial birthday celebration in the poet's honor at the University of Dayton. Today, as English professor emeritus, he teaches one course each semester and makes between 50 and 60 appearances annually around the country, stopping at schools, libraries and clubs. "It's mushroomed," he says.

Word of mouth has sparked Martin's popularity, but technology also has helped to ignite interest in the poet, the son of ex-slaves and classmate to two other Dayton men who gained national prominence — Orville and Wilbur Wright. Each month, between 5,000 and 10,000 people visit the University of Dayton's Dunbar Web site ([www.udayton.edu/~dunbar](http://www.udayton.edu/~dunbar)). One of UD's most popular sites and named last year as one of MSBET's top 10 sites, it features Martin bringing Dunbar's words to life. He performs such favorites as "We Wear the Mask" and "He Had His Dream." MSBET is the joint venture between Black Entertainment Television, the leading cable and broadcast company for African-Americans, and Microsoft.

Martin's interest extends beyond performing Dunbar's poems. The Web site, developed in 1997, features suggestions that teachers can use to teach the poetry to students in middle and secondary schools. In 1995, he selected poems and wrote the libretto for a new Dayton Opera one-act production, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground." In 1993, he located an original manuscript of Dunbar's never-published three-act play, "Herrick."

"We're trying to renew some interest in him," he says. "There are people out there who still have never heard of him."

Although he lived to be only 33 years old, Dunbar was prolific, writing short stories, novels, librettos, plays, songs and essays as well as the poetry for which he became well known. His style encompasses two distinct voices — the standard English of the classical poet and the evocative dialect of the turn-of-the-century black community in America. He was gifted in poetry — the way that Mark Twain was in prose — in using dialect to convey character.